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Lucia A Keegan 11/08/2006 02:45:27 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007108

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [AG](#) [FR](#) [MO](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: MFA SEES LITTLE CHANCE OF TALKS BETWEEN POLISARIO
AND MOROCCO

REF: STATE 172735

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The MFA DAS-equivalent for the Maghreb, Christian Testo, assessed there was little likelihood either Morocco or Algeria would agree to direct Moroccan-Polisario talks in the near future. In Testo's analysis, both Algeria and Tunisia were obsessed with their respective presidential successions. Finally, Testo did not deny press reports that Libya was seeking to purchase a variety of military hardware from France, but said that "nothing had been decided." End summary.

¶2. (C) In an October 26 meeting with Christian Testo, the MFA's DAS-equivalent for the Maghreb, Testo expressed "pleasant surprise" at the US decision to extend MINURSO's mandate by another six months. Testo noted that the Moroccan delegation which visited Washington to ask for additional time to work on a proposal for Western Sahara autonomy (reftel) was received in Paris by President Chirac and FM Douste-Blazy on October 16. The Moroccan delegation, led by FM Benissa, stressed King Mohamed VI's personal engagement in creating the autonomy proposal, an endeavor which his delegates characterized as historic. They also termed it risky, saying that if the Sahrawis won their autonomy, other regions of Morocco could be tempted to seek autonomy as well.

The French replied that only the Moroccans could unblock the current impasse, and that it was imperative that their autonomy proposal be based on meaningful consultations with the Sahrawis. "We told them it was not enough for the King to simply accord the Sahrawis autonomy, he had to consult with them," said Testo. The Moroccans took the point, and the French were left with the impression that the Moroccans were serious about producing a credible autonomy proposal.

¶3. (C) The Quai was less sanguine, however, on the prospects for direct talks between Morocco and the Polisario. The Moroccan delegates argued that there was no point in talking to the Polisario, which they regard as an Algerian puppet. Instead, the Moroccans suggested a formula whereby symbolic talks would be held between the Royal Council for Sahrawi Affairs and the Polisario, while parallel talks (i.e., the real negotiations) would take place between Morocco and Algeria. Testo said the French did not insist upon the point because they deemed it more important to first get a credible autonomy proposal in place, thereby creating a more propitious atmosphere for negotiations. Testo added that the Algerians appeared even less open to negotiations than did the Moroccans, and had refused to discuss the subject with the French -- who they believed to be seriously biased toward Rabat on the Western Sahara question. "We have no leverage," Testo lamented, adding that the Algerians were obsessed with the question of presidential succession. According to Testo, no one in Bouteflika's government would risk exposing himself on the Western Sahara until the succession question had been nailed down.

Tindouf and Tripoli

¶4. (C) In response to a question about the humanitarian situation in Tindouf, Testo admitted France had little insight into the situation and was obliged to consult with Spain to keep abreast of developments. Turning to Algeria's neighbor to the east, he assessed that the Tunisians, like the Algerians, were obsessed by succession issues. He added that while Tunisia was still ahead of its neighbors in terms of women's rights, secularism, and the existence of a true middle class, the price paid by Tunisia's civil society for its government's achievements was too high. Testo noted that the French had raised human rights in every high-level bilateral meeting they have held with the Tunisians over the past year, and had told their interlocutors it was imperative to open the society both for Tunisia's image and for Tunisia's future. These arguments fell on deaf ears. "The Tunisians don't listen to us," Testo said ruefully.

¶5. On the other hand, Testo seemed somewhat sympathetic to the position that the Tunisian government has taken recently against women wearing the veil in public. "The Tunisians argue that Islam should not be used for political purposes, and it's true that the opposition has a strategy of using religious symbols to make a political statement," he said. Moreover, he was critical of the EU's attempts to engage Tunisia on human rights, saying that "overreactions by the Nordic countries" had hurt EU-Tunisian relations. "We have to keep a sense of proportion," said Testo, who observed that some EU states seemed intent on singling out Tunisia for criticism in a way that they would not criticize, for example, Saudi Arabia.

Libyan Arms Purchases

¶6. (C) Finally, Poloff asked Testo about recent press reports indicating that Libya has gone on a shopping spree for French armaments, including a 400 million euros deal for six new patrol boats, a contract to refurbish Libya's aging Mirage F-1 aircraft, and expressions of interest in purchasing Rafale warplanes and Tiger helicopters. Testo reacted somewhat defensively, saying that it was "entirely legitimate" to sell military equipment to Libya now that Tripoli is no longer subject to UN sanctions. He hastened to add, however, that "nothing has been decided" about what weapons systems the French might provide.